

Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

Briefing Memo: Diplomacy During the Age of Expansion

For the first time since independence, Americans felt free to ignore the tangles of European politics. Napoleon's defeat brought political stability to Europe and allowed the United States to improve its relationship with Great Britain. As a result, the two sides were able to settle their outstanding territorial disputes and claims peacefully through negotiation. Americans believed that they were destined to occupy the entire continent, and now turned their attention toward the vast, unsettled west—and to the Spanish-controlled south.

New Revolutions

Revolutionary movements broke out in South America in 1809-1810 and won rhetorical support from North American politicians. Those independence movements brought unexpected benefits to the United States: Spain needed to reclaim her rebellious colonies and bought time by surrendering Florida and her claims to the Oregon territory to the United States. In exchange, the United States surrendered its own claims to Texas as a part of the Louisiana Purchase.

Secretary of State John Quincy Adams carefully balanced Britain's economic interests, the territorial aspirations of European states like France and Russia, and the needs of the fragile new American Republics. He feared that a diplomatic misstep might lead to European invasion. In 1823, President Monroe warned the Europeans to stay out. Although the United States was unable to back up its bold statement with force, the Monroe Doctrine would become a cornerstone of American foreign policy in later years.

Even though the Federal Government had surrendered its claims to Texas, Americans were still determined to acquire it. Settlers like Moses Austin moved into the Mexican-controlled territory, then fought for and won independence by 1836. Texans wanted immediate annexation by the United States, but political arguments over the expansion of slavery and diplomatic tensions kept the Lone Star state independent until 1845.

The new state of Texas sharpened diplomatic tensions with Mexico. Americans wanted the Rio Grande for its southern boundary and Mexico's claims to California—something to which no Mexican Government could ever agree. The result was war. President Polk took the unusual step of sending diplomat Nicholas Trist along with the invading American army. Even though the

President wanted the war to continue and recalled his diplomat, Trist believed it was in the best interests of the United States to end the war—and promptly did so. Although Polk called him a scoundrel, the treaty brought the United States virtually everything on its wish list, including New Mexico, California, and the Rio Grande boundary. In 1853, the United States purchased additional territory from Mexico to complete its southern border.

Southerners were interested not just in the expansion of the United States, but also in the expansion of lands open to the introduction of slavery. Cuba, Mexico, and Central America seemed to be an attractive option. Cuba seemed to be in reach and a group of diplomats plotted in 1854 to acquire it by purchase or force. Their plans came to nothing, but an opportunity further south held great promise.

Canal Dreams

Americans were not the only ones to dream of a Central American canal linking the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean, but growing trade, the acquisition of western territory, and the discovery of gold made their needs more urgent. Americans had stiff competition from the British, who seized territory in Nicaragua in 1849; territory that just happened to straddle the most likely path for a canal. But the British were willing to negotiate. In 1850, the two sides vaguely agreed to "facilitate" canal construction. The British also agreed not to occupy any other Western Hemisphere territory, and the Americans agreed not to acquire any part of Central America. As a result, many Americans considered it the worst treaty ever signed by the United States because it limited American expansion.

It did not limit American ambitions. The United States took the lead in "opening" the ancient kingdom of Japan to western trade and ideas. In 1854, an American fleet arrived in Japan and reached a diplomatic agreement. In 1859, America's first representative presented his credentials.

By 1860, United States territory extended from Atlantic to Pacific and from Maine to Mexico. American merchants bought and sold goods all around the world. The growth in economic opportunity and territorial expansion had been accomplished, for the most part, through diplomacy. But war was on the horizon, and diplomats were about to undertake their most difficult job yet—preservation of the Union. ■